

Children of God—Mosaics from Sin

April 26th, 2009

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Our reading comes from the 1st epistle of John: **pg. 1900 in pew bible**

This book doesn't have the features we would expect from a letter. No author, no audience, no salutation.

Some commentators think it might actually have been a general letter intended for wide circulation or maybe even a sermon. It shares themes with the gospel of John, one of which we will see in our reading this morning:

1 John 3:1-10 (*change, read through verse 10) pg. 1900 in pew bible**

May God add a blessing of understanding to this reading from the Holy Scriptures.

In the movie Slum Dog millionaire, a peasant boy from Mumbai, named Jamal, is near the land fill where he spends his life. He is using an outhouse that stands 10 or more feet above a swamp-like pool of human feces. Near the land fill is an air strip. While in the outhouse, Jamal's movie hero lands on the air strip. He can see through the cracks in the rickety wood, but, to his dismay, his friends have locked him in the outhouse. His desire to see his hero brings him over to the hole in the middle of the outhouse, where he stares in the mess below. Is it worth it? Should he jump down and wade through the feet of human sludge? He does, and coated from head to toe in human waste, he makes his way to the movie star.

Talking about “sin” can be like looking down from an outhouse. It's gross, and it just doesn't seem like its worth it to cover ourselves in that mess. Two years ago Kory preached a sermon series on “Christianity's Dirty Words,” which included a sermon on “sin.” I think Kory had a good sense for how some of us might feel about this topic. Sin is something many of us don't want to think through or deal with anymore. It's dirty. It's over-used. It belongs with the messiness of life. It's like a pile of you know what waiting for us through the hole of an outhouse. Who wants to jump into that? What wants to confront that messiness and see what it means?

The problem is that “sin,” like all theological language, can be abused, misused, and misunderstood. We may be all too familiar with the way “sin” has been used to make people feel guilty, worthless, and unfit to be a part of God's community. And so, too often, I'm afraid we'd rather just give up on the language altogether rather than try to engage it, reinterpret it, and see what it can show us. I want to suggest this morning that the Christian symbol of “sin” helps us see ourselves more clearly, the world in which we live more truly, and the God we serve more fully. Sin, while messy, is not trash to be forgotten, but a symbol to be explored. So I invite you to explore what this Christian symbol might mean this morning.

(Pause)

I remember receiving a call from my good friend Brian. He and I were attending different colleges but we kept in touch regularly. One day he called to tell me about a man who had come to his campus. He was a self-proclaimed evangelist

who had parked himself near a main walkway to proclaim the sinfulness of the student body. He decried all the evils and sins of college life: focusing mainly on fraternities and sororities (of course). While the list of sins was predictable, his claims were quite astounding. He argued that if you sin at all, then you don't know Jesus and you are not saved. Only those who do not sin, those who are perfect before God, know Jesus and are saved. And so he exhorted the students to repent, to turn from their wickedness and come to Jesus.

I remember asking Brian, “was he using the bible at all?” “Of course,” Brian answered, “I think it was 1st John.”

Our New Testament Scripture this morning is a tough passage. While it is rich with meaning, it presents a picture of Christian life that easily lends itself to the kind of self-righteousness we often hear from street corner evangelists. Only those who are sinless know God and abide with God. Anyone who sins is, as verse 8 indicates, of the devil. Like the street-corner evangelist, the rhetoric in our passage this morning is inflated. It represents an “us vs. them” mentality. For our author, the community of faith is an isolated group, pure and holy, an escape from the sinfulness of the world. Sin is an “out there” kind of thing, not an “in here” kind of thing. Life is not very ambiguous in 1st John. You are either purified, free of sin and with us *or you're not*.

What's happening in our text is that a community has seen a split. A group of people haven broken off and this letter is designed to make sense of what is going on for those who remain. In doing so, those who have left are considered unfaithful and unloving, they did not “love their brothers or sisters” (v.10). So

they are considered “of the devil” (v.8), not “of God” (v.9).

I find this picture of church and of sin troubling. Not only does it make anyone outside the walls of a particular church look like worthless devil worshipers; but it can also lead those of us who are part of a church to have a false sense of security, a false sense of righteousness. We can think that if we come to church and say the right stuff or do a few nice things, that we are somehow perfect and unblemished, free from sinning against ourselves, others, or God. It has led some, like that college campus evangelist, to turn out toward others and point fingers of blame and shame.

I want to suggest that the church *is not* a community of saints, if by saints we understand the perfect, the holy, the righteous, and the pure. We are not sinless by virtue of being in these walls. That way of thinking is inflated and doesn't take seriously the contours and complexities of life. Life is too intricate to be divided up into the pure and impure, the sinful and the sinless. We don't move cleanly from “Sinful” to “Sinless.” We are stuck, as human beings, in the midst of a world rife with Sin. Nothing is quite as clean and neat as it looks. Scam artists profit because we often want things to be easy, simple, and painless... but life usually doesn't work that way. Paul Tillich called the reality of life *ambiguous*. I tend to agree. Ambiguity is term that indicates there are at least two kinds of things going on at the same time.

So I don't think Sin is something that we leave behind once we come into communion with God. St. Paul struggled with the power and reality of sin. He wrestled with the law of sin in Romans chapter 7, fighting against himself and

what he knew to be from God. Martin Luther, writing 14 centuries later, explained this struggle by arguing that Christians are at one and the same time made right before God (“justified”) and yet still sinners. Sin accompanies us on our Christian journey. We don't become perfect and pure by joining a church and claiming to know Jesus. While we might struggle to live our lives better, more faithfully, and with a different view of the world, we are still accompanied by Sin.

While Sin accompanies us on our Christian journey, Sin still seems like such a “dirty word.” I'm sure we would be willing to admit that we make mistakes, have imperfections, and could work on being nicer, but the “Sin” word brings the baggage of worthlessness and total depravity. We might want to admit that we could do life better, but we don't want to admit that we are total scum-bags. Something about that seems damaging and untrue.

Sin distorts the way we should see ourselves before God. But the truth about Sin is that it has two sides. Sin can take the form of pride and arrogance, it can take the form of thinking ourselves better than we are. We are, after all, only creatures and *God* is creator. When we think and act as if *we* are God, then we are living with a force of distortion known as Sin. But there is another side to Sin. The side usually ignored or forgotten. We are *creatures* of God. As such, we are valued and we are valuable. While we typically think of Sin as *overvaluing* ourselves before God, Sin is also *undervaluing* ourselves before God. Sins happen because we see ourselves and our world incorrectly. To think ourselves as worthless and completely depraved is a distortion as well! That too is Sin taking its toll on us! 1st John, despite its inflated rhetoric, reminds us that we are all Children of God. As God's Children, as creatures of the Creator, we are shown love and given

inexhaustible value.

There are many examples of this underside of Sin. We are tempted to believe that unless we look, or dress, or act a certain way, then we won't be accepted. We are tempted to think that only if we have a certain amount of money or a particular job, or any job at all, that we are worth people's attention and respect. We look at a regrettable moment in our past, a decision we wish we could change or something we wish we could have done, and we let that define us. We let that dominate our lives and keep us from seeing how God loves us, values us, and has a future for us. That too is Sin. Its the Sin of undervaluing ourselves. It is the Sin of seeing ourselves as *only* worthless sinners. There are two things at work in the ambiguity of life. Our Sin, infecting how we understand ourselves and causing us to misvalue ourselves before God. And God's Grace, constantly reminding us that we are loved and valued, that we are made valuable in God's sight. Sin is a kind of forgetting, forgetting that God looks down upon us, just as God did in Genesis, and calls us "Good, very Good."

I tend to think the church is not so much a community of saints as a *hospital for sinners*: we gather amidst the brokenness and sinfulness of our lives—amidst the mistakes, imperfections, difficult choices, regrets, and distorted views of ourselves—in order to hope together, heal together, serve together, and worship together. In this way we are nursed by God, week in and week out, toward spiritual health. Sometimes we need to be reminded that we are creature and not creator. Other times we need to be reminded that we are in fact God's *beloved* creature! In all this, we haven't escaped the reality of Sin, its toll is constantly being collected on our lives—we act out distorted self-images and are tempted to

think that is the end of the story; but it isn't: we can bring our Sin before God.

Bringing our lives before God, distorted as they are by Sin, is like bringing pieces of stone to an artist. Damaged, broken, shattered stones can be joined with others to make a masterful mosaic. In much the same way, God takes the pieces of our lives, joins them with others in church community, and crafts something truly beautiful. When our Sin-tattered lives are given to God to be placed in relation to others, something beautiful and good can emerge. God can make a mosaic out of us yet. The mosaic does not cease to be a collection of broken stones; no, the brokenness remains, Sin remains. And so we remain, with ambiguous lives, living as people justified and good before God and yet still sinners. We live simultaneously as broken stones and a beautiful Mosaic.